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The Lunenburg Letter

An Incident in the History of the Interpretation of Baptism

Glenn Paden

(Editor's note: It was the work of the reformer Alexander Campbell which gave widespread acceptance to the position that New Testament baptism is adult baptism of a penitent believer for the remission of sins. The Campbells at first did not envision a new religious fellowship as a result of their work. They were forced to become an independent group when their plea for a united church upon the pattern of New Testament teaching was rejected. In time they came to believe that the willful adherence to denominational organizations and human creeds in the face of a plea for a return to the simple New Testament church constituted grounds for regarding these denominations as sects and as being in rebellion against God's way. They began with the idea of Christians in all churches but came to see that many rejected the plain teaching of the Bible as to what constituted a Christian. The discussion of "Christians in the sects" was an important discussion in the history of the Restoration movement. The Lunenburg Letter helps us to understand what the younger Campbell believed about this question.)

It is not the purpose of this writer to give any ideas or opinions of his own about "Christians among the sects." It is his purpose to show Campbell's true attitude along this line. Campbell's feelings and attitudes do not necessarily correspond with the teachings found in the New Testament. If he was too liberal, he was simply wrong in that phase of the truth; we recognize no man as perfect, save Jesus Christ our Lord.

"The Lunenburg Letter" is a query that came to Alexander Campbell from a lady who lived in Lunenburg, Virginia. She had already read over half of the June 1837 issue of the *Millennial Harbinger* when she came upon these words in an article headed "Letters to England":

We would, indeed, have no objections to cooperate in these matters with *all Christians*, and raise contributions for all such purposes as, in our judgment, are promotive of the Divine glory or of human happiness, whether or not they belong to our churches: *for we find in all Protestant parties Christians* as exemplary as ourselves according to their and our knowledge and opportunities.¹

After reading the above, the lady from Lunenburg wrote to Alexander Campbell the following letter:

Dear brother Campbell—I was much surprised today, while reading the Harbinger, to see that you recognize the Protestant parties as Christian. You say, you find in all Protestant parties Christians.

Dear brother, my surprise and ardent desire to do what is right, prompt me to write to you at this time. I feel well assured, from the estimate you place on the female character,

¹Campbell, *Millennial Harbinger*, Vol. VIII (1837), p. 272.

that you will attend to my feeble questions in search of knowledge.

Will you be so good as to let me know how any one becomes a Christian? What act of yours gave you the name of Christian? At what time had Paul the name of Christ called on him? At what time did Cornelius have Christ named on him? Is it not through this name we obtain eternal life? Does the name of Christ or Christian belong to any but those who believe the gospel, repent, and are buried by baptism into the death of Christ?²

Campbell did not endeavor to answer the questions one by one, but he did get to the main point that she had in mind. He reasoned that this was what she was wanting to know.

In reply to this conscientious sister, I observe, that if there be no Christians in the Protestant sects, there are certainly none among the Romanists, none among the Jews, Turks, Pagans; and therefore no Christians in the world except ourselves, or such of us as keep, or strive to keep, all the commandments of Jesus. Therefore, for many centuries there has been no church of Christ, no Christians in the world; and the promises concerning the everlasting kingdom of Messiah have failed, and *the gates of hell have prevailed against his church!* This cannot be; and therefore there are Christians among the sects.³

One of the main problems to come up after such a statement would be "Who is a Christian?" Campbell answers with the following words:

But who is a Christian? I answer, every one that believes in his heart that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the Son of God; repents of his sins, and obeys him in all things *according to his measure of knowledge* of his will. A perfect man in Christ, or a perfect Christian, is one thing; and "a babe in Christ," a stripling in the faith, or an imperfect Christian, is another. The New Testament recognizes both the perfect man and the imperfect man in Christ . . . There is no occasion, then, for making immersion, on a profession of the faith, absolutely essential to a Christian—though it may be greatly essential to his sanctification and comfort.⁴

Hence, Campbell's answer is that one who has not been baptized for the remission of sins may be a Christian, though an imperfect one. His premise is that a person is only accountable as far as his knowledge goes.

It is the image of Christ the Christian looks for and loves and this does not consist in being exact in a few items, but in general devotion to the whole truth as far as known.⁵

Ignorance is always a crime when it is voluntary; and innocent when it is involuntary.⁶

Campbell then speaks obscurely about an "inward" and an "outward" baptism and thinks that one might have the inward baptism without the outward baptism and be a Christian of the imperfect

²Campbell, *The Lunenburg Letter with Attendant Comments*, p. 2.

³Campbell, *Millennial Harbinger*, Vol. VIII, p. 411.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 411, 414.

⁵Campbell, *Millennial Harbinger*, Vol. VIII, p. 412.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 413.

type, provided, of course, that this person was one who did not willfully neglect the outward baptism.

Can a person who simply, not perversely, mistakes the outward baptism, have the inward? We all agree that he who willfully or negligently perverts the outward, cannot have the inward. But can he who, through a simple mistake, involving no perversity of mind, has misapprehended the outward baptism, yet submitting to it according to his view of it, have the inward baptism which changes his state and has praise of God, though not of all men? is the precise question. To which I answer, that, in my opinion, it is possible.⁷

Before attempting to interpret these statements it will be well to see if Campbell actually taught that baptism was for the remission of sins. Some would try to deny that the mature Campbell really taught that baptism was essential to salvation and that he felt that the "Christians" of all churches were real Christians. A recent book says of this matter: "Alexander Campbell, however, in his reply to the Lunenburg letter, insisted that the unimmersed were Christians."⁸ But on the question of baptism's being a Biblical prerequisite to becoming a Christian or being saved, Campbell's writing is decisive.

It is best to fix the minds of the biblical students upon a very important fact; viz., that immersion is the converting act; or, that *no person is disciplined to Christ until he is immersed.*⁹

To be saved is to be pardoned, to be brought under the sceptre of Jesus. Hence all who believed and were baptized were said to be saved, because *Christ had declared they should be saved.*¹⁰

The Bible says, "*He that believeth and is immersed shall be saved.*" How few believe it! The Bible says, "Except a man be born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God." How few believe it! The Bible says, "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in thy heart that God raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved."¹¹

The question is, at what instant of time do we enter this kingdom, or come under this reign of God, and by what means? I say, the moment we vow allegiance to the king in the constituted way—the moment we are naturalized—the *moment we are born of water and the Spirit*—the moment we put on Christ—the instant we are converted, and not before.¹²

A gospel without remission of sins is a misnomer; and no person, in those undegenerate days, could preach remission without naming water. . . I am for principles of action. Therefore *I proclaim faith, reformation, immersion, adoption, and eternal life.*¹³

The gospel has in it a command, and as such must be obeyed. On this side, and on that, mankind are in quite different states. On the one side they are pardoned, justified, sanctified, recon-

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 507.

⁸Garrison and DeGroot, *The Disciples of Christ* (St. Louis, Christian Board of Publication, 1948), p. 389.

⁹Campbell, *Ibid.*, Vol. 1-Extra, p. 16.

¹⁰Campbell, *Millennial Harbinger*, Vol. I, p. 30.

¹¹*Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 31.

¹²*Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 136.

¹³*Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 13.

ciled, adopted, and saved: *on the other they are in a state of condemnation*. This act is sometimes called immersion, regeneration, or conversion.¹⁴

Question—"Who are the members of a church of Christ?"

Answer—"Those only who voluntarily and joyfully submit to him as lawgiver, prophet, priest, and king: who assume him as their saviour, die to sin, *are buried with him*, and rise to walk in a new life."¹⁵

Those writings show us that Campbell did understand the significance of baptism as connected with salvation.

In apparent contradiction to all this is the concept found frequently throughout his writings that speaks of "disciples" of Christ or "Christians in the sects."

The following was written by Campbell in the *Christian Baptist* in the year 1825:

I have no idea of seeing, nor wish to see, the sects unite in one grand army. This would be dangerous to our liberties and laws. For this the Saviour did not pray. It is only the *disciples dispersed among them* that reason and benevolence would call out of them . . .¹⁶

On the evening before Campbell departed to debate with Mr. Owen, he wrote in the issue of the *Christian Baptist* of April 6, 1829:

I rejoice to know and feel that I have the good wishes, the prayers, and the hopes of myriads of *Christians in all denominations*.¹⁷

For our last excerpt from the *Christian Baptist* we go to the issue of October 1826.

I suppose all agree that *among Christians of every name there are disciples of Jesus Christ*, accepted of God in him, *real members of his body*, branches in the true vine, and therefore all one in Christ.¹⁸

The following exchange is representative of the positions taken in the *Millennial Harbinger*:

Question—"Would you say that the different Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodistic, and Baptist sects, are built upon any other foundation than the New Testament?"

Answer—"They say so themselves; for they have each formed a covenant or constitution, rules and laws for their own government, and do require more or less than the Christian institutions for admission into, or continuance in, their communities. *None of them will receive or retain all the disciples of Christ*."¹⁹

Question—"Are there, then, no disciples of Christ in these sects?"

Answer—"There are, no doubt, many."

Campbell argued that, there being Christians in the sects, attend-

¹⁴*Ibid.*, Vol. I-Extra, p. 12.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, Vol. III, p. 351.

¹⁶Vol. II, p. 85.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, Vol. VI, p. 239.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, Vol. IV, p. 53.

¹⁹*Millennial Harbinger*, Vol. III, p. 362.

ing worship with such congregations did not warrant the conclusion that the sects were justified:

So there being Christians in any sectarian commonwealth, or a sectarian in any Christian commonwealth, does not change the nature or character of such a commonwealth.²⁰

When asked what he thought was the duty of all Christians among the sects, he said (in the same place), "They are commanded to 'Come out of them'." (Rev. 18:4)²¹

In the first volume of the *Millennial Harbinger* this statement was made: "Then none of the unimmersed can be saved; for none can enter the kingdom of God, but those born of water." To this, Campbell replied:

This is or is not true, according as you understand the term saved. For the present salvation of the gospel is that salvation into which we enter, when we become citizens of the kingdom of God. But whether they may enter into the kingdom of future and eternal glory after the resurrection, is a question much like that question long discussed in the schools; viz. Can infants who have been quickened, but who died before they were born, be saved? We may hope the best, but cannot speak with the certainty of knowledge. . . *We have no authority to speak comfortably to them who will not submit to the government of the Saviour.*

Many persons, I doubt not, who never were informed on these matters, but simply mistook the import and design of the institution, who were nevertheless honestly disposed to obey, and *did obey as far as they were instructed*, may, as the devout Jews and Patriarchs who lived before the Christian era, *be admitted into the kingdom of future glory*. . . I am sure of one thing; because the decree is published; viz. that he that believes the gospel and is immersed shall be saved; and he who submits not to the government of Jesus Christ shall be condemned.²²

When asked if he expected to sit down in heaven with all Christians of all sects and, if so, why not sit down at the same table with them here, he said,

It is time enough to behave as they do in heaven when we meet there. I expect to meet with those whom we call Patriarchs, Jews, and Pagans, in heaven. . . *Some of all these sort of people may be fellow-citizens in heaven*. . . I do expect to meet with some of "all nations, tribes, and tongues," in the heavenly country. But while on earth I must live and behave according to the order of things under which I am placed.²³

The Lunenburg letter is, then, to be interpreted in the light of its context. Campbell seems to be saying that immersion is definitely required to become a member of the kingdom of God or the church. But he goes on to say that it has not been a requirement for all in all ages for eternal life. He feels that many who obey as far as they are instructed may be admitted into the kingdom of future glory. He would also say that there is a chance that one may mistake the im-

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 363.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²Campbell, *Millennial Harbinger*, Vol. I-Extra, p. 30.

²³*Ibid.*, Vol. VI, p. 193.

port and design of baptism. He seems to feel that if a person does this honestly, there is a chance he may receive eternal life. Campbell said many times that what he said about Christians in the sects was merely his opinion. These were the ones who had done all that they honestly knew to do.

One last quotation shows the real attitude that Campbell had.

But the question is, are we authorized to make the sincerity and honesty of a person's mind a rule of our conduct? *'Tis God alone who is judge of this*, and surely he would not require us to act by a rule which we can never apply to the case. Neither, perhaps, is it a fair position to assume that any man's sincerity in opinion or belief will have any weight in the final judgment; but whether or not, it cannot be a rule of our proceeding in any case. We judge from actions—*God judges the heart*; and, therefore, we look for visible obedience; and when we are assured that the Lord has commanded every man to confess him, or to profess the faith and be immersed into his name, *we can never justify ourselves* before God or man in presuming in our judgment of charity to set aside his commandment, and in accepting for it a human substitute.²⁴

Surely Campbell's idea that if one had never had opportunity to hear the truth or study the Bible, but had done all that he knew of right and wrong and all he knew to do to be a Christian, he might be considered a Christian in an imperfect sense and the Lord might save him is of little comfort to those who set aside the plain teaching of the New Testament when they have learned it. Campbell's insistence that those in error come out of denominationalism is decisive as is his plain teaching that baptism for remission of sins is a part of the New Testament pattern.

²⁴Campbell, *Millennial Harbinger*, Vol. II, p. 393.